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The Drive Way

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Paris Mountain rises on the horizon behind Fluor Field at the West End as the sun sets in downtown Greenville. It has officially been 10 years since the Greenville Drive became upstate South Carolina's only minor league baseball team, but the Fenway Park-replica is still recognized as one of the finest stadiums in the country.





COURTESY OF THE GREENVILLE DRIVE

The Comeback

THE Drive WAY

BY RON WAGNER '93

FURMAN AND GREENVILLE'S HOME TEAM CELEBRATE A WINNING PARTNERSHIP

As hard as it may be to believe, the Drive has entered its second decade in downtown Greenville. But before owner Craig Brown is ready to delve into the past, he wants to show off the present.

"Let's get in the baseball mood. Come out and take a look at this," he tells a visitor before opening the back door of the team's offices at 945 Main St. and leading the way outside. Fluor Field at the West End bursts into view, still resplendent green in late November as it spreads panoramically. Mission accomplished.

It's the same view fans enjoyed for the first time last season after a hundred seats were installed on the 30-foot-high left-field wall as part of a \$10 million upgrade. The project earned an award from Ballpark Digest for Best Ballpark Renovation and mimicked a similar expansion at Boston's Fenway Park, which Brown replicated when the field was designed over a decade ago.

That bold idea and flawless execution – incredibly, the first game was played only 11 months after ground broke – prompted Ballparks.com to name Fluor Field the Ballpark of the Year

“IT STEMS FROM OUR DESIRE . . . TO BRING AWARENESS TO EVERYTHING THAT FURMAN HAS TO OFFER”

when it opened in 2006. The home of upstate South Carolina’s only minor league baseball franchise still looks brand new. That fits nicely with all the new development outside its gates.

Another thing hard to miss from atop the wall are prominent Furman logos on the Furman on Deck Picnic Pavilion beyond the right-field foul line and the roof of the dugout the Paladins use when they play there. You can see one or the other from almost anywhere in the stadium, which meant that last year alone the Furman name was seen by more than 328,000 people in the ballpark.

Both outcomes are exactly what Brown dreamt of when he reluctantly moved the old Capital City Bombers up I-26 after negotiations for a new stadium in Columbia failed. **David Shi ’73** was Furman’s president at the time.

“It was literally the first partnership I sought out,” Brown says. “When you’re new to a community, from a business sense, you’re trying to find the institutions and the people that are most influential . . . (It started) out first from a baseball

side to kind of be Furman’s home away from home, and it’s evolved into a full-scale partnership that’s covered both sponsorship, community messaging, baseball, athletics, academics and many of the community-based institutions that Furman has.”

Latham Stadium, Furman’s home baseball stadium, features a video scoreboard donated by the Drive, and the Paladins have played to crowds of more than 6,000 at Fluor Field. Fluor Field also hosted the Furman Football Fan Fest,

and the Drive sponsored the Furman baseball team’s fundraiser, the Upstate Diamond Classic, for the 11th straight year while allowing the Paladins to host games there. But many other less-visible events are just as important.

“We’ve held several May X classes that have gone down to the Drive to learn about the history of baseball, the economics of a minor league team, what it means to be a partner in a community,” says Liz Seman, Furman’s chief of staff and liaison to the Board of Trustees.



Top: The Boston Red Sox send their top prospects to Greenville to get the experience they need to become major leaguers.

Bottom left: Fans enjoy the view from atop the single row of seats recently installed atop the 30-foot-high left field wall at Fluor Field. Bottom right:

Drive owner Craig Brown sought out a partnership with Furman soon after he moved the team to Greenville from Columbia, South Carolina.

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Every year, Furman plays in front of some of the largest college baseball crowds in the country when it takes on Clemson at Fluor Field.

We have done everything from a mock trial to continuing education events there. Our graduation party is held there. We've celebrated Heller Service Corps' 50th anniversary at the Drive."

Seman describes the Drive as one of Furman's "keystone partnerships," joining the Furman entrance at Bon Secours Wellness Arena, the Upcountry History Museum and the recently opened Furman on Main in the M. Judson Booksellers building. These partnerships further

the university's goal of becoming a more visible part of Greenville.

"We're not that far, right? Seven miles from downtown to here, but somehow that Poinsett Corridor seems longer," Seman says. "It stems from our desire to reclaim Greenville since we are Greenville's university, to bring awareness to everything that Furman has to offer and to provide opportunities for our faculty, staff and students to be engaged in things outside of our gates."





Brown is a Michigan State graduate, and his strong ties to Lansing have turned MSU and Furman into frequent opponents. He helped set up the football clash between Furman and MSU in 2016, as well as the annual First Pitch Invitational at Fluor Field that always features the Paladins, Spartans and two other teams.

"High school kids all come to college hoping to get a chance to play professional baseball," says Furman Athletics Director Mike Buddie, a one-time major league pitcher. "And to get to play in a replica of Fenway Park, and to get to play South Carolina and Clemson and Michigan State in that ballpark are definitely recruiting advantages."

Brown had never been to South Carolina when he and his business partner made the decision to purchase the team after more than two decades working in advertising in New York City. But now he's as invested in Greenville and the Upstate as anyone.

"Each year you realize more that, yes, this is baseball and

you love baseball and everything to do with sports, but fundamentally as a business it's a community engagement platform, and there are so many things you can do that really can better the community and make the Upstate a better place," he says. "Our strongest desire is to be part of the fabric of the community,

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The Paladins finished second in the 2017 Southern Conference Tournament, just missing a chance at the NCAA tournament. The SoCon tourney will be held at Fluor Field again in 2018, from May 22-27.



The hospitality area beyond the right-field foul line at Fluor Field has been rebranded as “Furman on Deck,” giving the university an even greater presence at the popular downtown Greenville baseball stadium. The redesign of the picnic pavilion that hosts up to 500 guests includes a prominent sign at the entrance as well as flags, banners and other signage with university logos.



and if you're part of the fabric of the community that really defines who you should partner with . . . Furman was very much at the top of that list.”

The Furman Advantage, Furman's ambitious effort to guarantee every incoming student an engaged learning experience that is tracked and integrated with his or her

academic and professional goals, only makes Brown more enthusiastic.

“To have Furman hang their hat on that student experience while at a liberal arts school, but differentiating from the work experience in the community, was a great match with what we try to stand for,” he says. “Partner-

ship is like any relationship. You always need to invest in it. You never should take it for granted . . . I think we can really help make it come alive, not by talking about it but by showing the end product, the result of what comes from The Furman Advantage.” ●